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A narrative research of Taiwan clinical social worker's professional self in the helping process

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Abstract

This research is a narrative analysis of Taiwan clinical social workers' professional selves in their helping process. According to interviews, the two roles of clinical social workers involve professional expertise and the helping relationship. Although these participants agree on the importance of professional expertise, they cannot describe what it is; yet they clearly point out that forming such a relationship carries certain connotations. The article reveals that when giving help to clients, using the professional self is conducive to forming relationships with clients. The author highlights these key values in the research as reflecting an affinity with that in western literatures, especially Carl Roger's person-centered therapy. Nevertheless, the author considers it far more difficult for Taiwan clinical social workers to successfully integrate the professional self, than for their Western counterparts. Based on the research findings, the author hopes this article can contribute to clinical social work practice, social work education and future research.

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Keywords : Clinical social work, narrative research, professional self.

1. Introduction

This research is a narrative analysis of Taiwan clinical social workers' professional selves in their helping process. The purpose of this research is to understand clinical social workers' effective helping experiences and their subjective interpretations, to explore how they use their professional selves to help clients effectively, and to also find out how the cultural context influences them.

Social work is a practical science that crucially depends on both scientific connotations and the artistic characteristics. Clinical social workers not only must assess client problems and further make interventions for resolving the problems, but must also simultaneously influence clients in helping relationships. This practice involves two different capacities that social workers must carry out, which will influence the helping effect (Kramer,1999; Edwards & Bess,1998; Brammer,1993; Siporin,1993). Helping styles are related to professional self-image, self identity, and use of the professional self. Most social work literatures often highlight that it is crucial for clinical social workers to perceive and make good use of themselves to help clients(Liechty,2005;

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Seligson,2004; Thorne,2002; Aponte & Winter,1999; Shadley,1999; Baldwin,1999; Rothman,1999; Satir,1999; Corey & Corey,1998; Coady & Wolgien,1996; Brammer,1993). The professional self is closely related to the personal self, both of which are mutually interactive. The "self" is highly connected with the culture and shaped in multiple facets (Reupert,2007; Dewane,2006; Liechty,2005; Yan & Wong,2005; Rowan & Jacobs,2002; Corey,2001; Greene et al.,1996). To further clarify the clinical social workers' professional self, applications should extend beyond cultural differences or contexts. Clarifying the professional self through different cultural contexts and background values is therefore necessary.

2. Methodology

A genuine understanding of "self" is obtained primarily from the experience of interaction and dialogue between "I" and "Me" via the media as verbal or behavioral expressions. Self and narratives cannot be isolated from each other. Through narratives, the narrator reorganizes new meaning to the life and reconstructs self identification (Riessman,2008; Savin-Baden & Niekerk,2007; Wortham,2001; Ochs & Capps,1996; Greenberg,1995; Ross,1992; Polkinghorne,1988; Cooley,1968). Hence, this research applies a narrative approach to recognize the "self" in clinical social work in Taiwan. Fifteen clinical social workers in Taiwan participated in this study. Each of them participated in at least two in-depth interviews, each lasting not less than two hours. The participants had backgrounds in social work professional training, with more than three years of clinical social work experiences. Research questions in this study include the following: (a) what is the connotation of these clinical social workers' professional self in their effective helping processes? ; (b) How do clinical social workers make good use of their professional selves to effectively help clients?

The researcher in this study invited the fifteen research participants to share two types of stories. The first story is mainly their life story, including their essential life experiences and personal experiences within their social work professional careers; and the other is their helping experiences, including the most successful achievement and the most regretful failure. Two or more interviews were performed on each participant and each interview lasted about two to three hours. Every interview was recorded with the permission of the participants. The dialogues were then transcribed thoroughly with references of field notes, and the participants checked the transcripts. For reliability and validity of the study, all or part of the research analysis was performed with peer reviews among senior social-work scholars and workers, as well as some of the research participants.

2.1. Research Findings

The stories from the narratives of the fifteen participants showed highly consistent implications even though the participants shared various experiences. Every story acknowledged that fact that varying factors are attributable to the effect of the helping process. Of all the factors, the two most important involve the role of helpers with professional expertise and the helping relationships they form. One of the participants, Lin, shared that, the core competence for helping clients is a very professional expertise on "*advanced treatment*", including directly pointing out problems which clients encounter, appropriately making intervention in the right moment, and providing positive advice or treatment. Participants also highly agreed that a clinical social worker should establish a trustworthy helping relationship to influence clients via relationships. Another participant, Chang, shared that, "*it is necessary to establish a helping relationship..., I have to let the client understand that I am really want to help him/her...*". For major interviewee, these two helping roles are required and there must be interaction between the two.

Although participants agreed on the importance of professional expertise within the helping process, they did not know how to precisely articulate it, or they discussed the theory approaches and skill styles, they did so using vague descriptions. In discussing her experiences, Tsai mentioned, "*it is difficult for me to be aware of the theory background immediately in my helping process. I should probably try to analysis the theoretical concepts to be prepared for case conferences...*".

While talking about the helping relationship, not only did participants confirm relevance of the helping process, but they clearly pointed out that forming such a relationship carries the connotation of acceptance, empathy, genuineness, and a transparent relationship built on the helpers' self-awareness. Heh is a very experienced social worker in a mental-disabled service institute. She shared in an interview, "*respect and acceptance are the most*

important when giving help to clients...". Almost every one highlighted "empathy and support" in the interview. This relationship is not only a "presence with clients", but also a "deep understanding". These clinical social workers furthermore emphasized on "genuineness and consistency". Chen, as an experienced medical social worker, shared that "preparing to love people" is very crucial for helpers. Most participants emphasized that "genuineness" is necessary when performing "acceptance and empathy", and it is effective in the helping process.

According to their stories, despite the fact that these clinical social workers could make good use of their personal characteristics to form relationships, they still felt puzzled about integrating their personal selves with professional theories and skills. The article reveals that when giving help to clients, clinical social workers must use their professional selves, such as altruism, warmth, activity, sensitivity, integrity, which, they admit, are conducive to forming relationships with clients. Their stories indicated that, they persisted in making every effort to maximize benefits to clients. Huang describes herself as a clinical social worker who is "easy to be touched..., to empathize with the situation others fall into..., however to be reasonable if it is necessary...". Most participants never give up on clients. They usually fight for social justice to the last. They still involved themselves when reviewing their clients in interviews. Unfortunately, they seemingly had no idea on choosing the most appropriate theory and skill suitable for their personal style, and felt frustrated in integrating their professional selves with their personal selves.

3. Conclusion

The research findings of this study reveal that Taiwan clinical social workers perceive that helpers should integrate their professional and personal selves. Clinical social workers also try their best to make good use of professional expertise and helping relationships in order to help clients. Aside from the findings above, the author finds that the key values, such as acceptance, empathy, etc, highlighted in the research reflect an affinity with those values in western literatures, especially in Carl Roger's person-centered therapy. Nevertheless, the author considers it far more difficult for Taiwan clinical social workers than for their counterparts, to successfully integrate the professional self with the personal self. The difficulty in integrating the self is probably related to different cultural contexts. The quintessence of "self" in Chinese culture/ideology is very different from the Western ideal. The difference lies not only in world view but also in the knowledge perspectives and fundamental assumptions of human beings. In the Western context, people follow rational law which emphasizes on personal self-awareness and self-reflection. In contrast, the Chinese perspective emphasizes the integration of people and the universe. The Chinese pursuit is on the coherent status of "harmony between the human being and the world". Based on different cultural foundations, the meanings of "self" in Chinese and the West are distinct, and the ways to become an integrated self are different.

Based on the research findings, the author hopes, since it is important to perform an integrated self, that Taiwan social work professionals enhance the clinical field supervision and even support shaping social work students' helping style as soon as possible. Social work researchers could also design more studies related to social workers' use-of-self and further explore the significance of culture in the helping process. Furthermore, the author hopes that this article will contribute to clinical social work practice, social work education and future research, and facilitate the development of the clinical social work profession.

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